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080048Z Apr 05

ACTION EAP-00

INFO	LOG-00	NP-00	AID-00	CIAE-00	INL-00	DODE-00	DS-00
	EUR-00	OIGO-00	UTED-00	H-00	TEDE-00	INR-00	IO-00
	NSAE-00	OIC-00	PA-00	PER-00	SP-00	FMP-00	DSCC-00
	PRM-00	DRL-00	G-00	NFAT-00	SAS-00	SWCI-00	/000W

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1295  
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY  
ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY  
USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY  
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000364

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SENSITIVE

GENEVA FOR UNCHR DEL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: GVN BEGINS CONSULTATIONS ON DECREE ON RELIGION: FRICTIONS  
WITH UBCV FESTER

REF: A) HCMC 288; B) HANOI 580; C) 04 HCMC 147; D) HCMC 325; E)

HCMC 190; F) 04 HCMC 1481

1. (SBU) Summary: Contacts in the Protestant community report that central- and provincial-level officials have begun formal consultations on implementation of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. The officially recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam has begun a training course for pastors in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai while leaders of the house church movement report a sharp reduction in police harassment throughout southern and central Vietnam. Local authorities also allowed an unrecognized Hoa Hao group to hold a controversial prayer service in the Mekong Delta. However, frictions continue unabated with the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). A UBCV monk was detained last week while attempting to smuggle out of Vietnam a recording of the UBCV General Secretary that, inter alia, called for the end of one-party rule in Vietnam. The UBCV's outspoken advocacy for comprehensive political change in Vietnam explains continued GVN hostility towards the UBCV even as authorities show new flexibility towards other religious organizations. End Summary.

GVN BEGINS TO EXPLAIN NEW DECREE TO PRACTITIONERS  
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2. (SBU) Contacts in the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told us that the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) organized a conference in HCMC on April 1 to introduce to practitioners the Implementing Decree on Religion and Belief (more on the Decree in refs A and B). More than 150 representatives of Vietnam's six recognized religions from the southern and central provinces attended. A similar conference is scheduled to take place in Hanoi on April 8. While the SECV welcomed the GVN's initiative to hold the conference, they were disappointed with the content and do not have a better understanding of how the Decree -- and the entire new legal framework on religion -- will be administered. The conference lasted only three hours and was primarily used to introduce the participants to the various forms and paperwork that the GVN plans to use in conjunction with the Decree. The SECV plans to hold more detailed discussions with the HCMC CRA to discuss implementation of the Decree. Overall, the expectation is that the central-level CRA will work with the SECV board and provincial-level governments to ensure uniform application.

3. (SBU) Leaders in the HCMC house church community told us that they were not invited to attend the April 1 conference. They had not yet received instruction from Vietnamese authorities on how to implement the Decree. Their expectation was that Government input would be forthcoming, and they noted positively that the level of police harassment of house churches continues to drop throughout southern and central Vietnam. (Note: We have heard similar comments from house church leaders in the Northwest Highlands. End Note.) Nguyen Ngoc San, the Chairman of the HCMC CRA, confirmed to us on April 4 that his office would begin consulting with all religious groups in HCMC on the new legal framework, including house church organizations.

4. (SBU) Separately, an SECV leader in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai told us that the SECV was able to begin a provincial-level training class for new pastors in accordance with the Decree. The classes were originally authorized in a letter

from the central-level CRA to the SECV "On the Operation of Protestantism in the Central Highlands" (Ref C). They are intended to allow individuals currently working as unofficial preachers for the SECV to obtain a diploma and, subsequently, Government recognition as SECV pastors, allowing them officially to take charge of a congregation of their own. The SECV indicated that it hopes to open a similar course in Dak Lak under the provisions of the letter, but preparations there have been more difficult.

HOA HAO MEET PEACEFULLY  
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15. (SBU) Meanwhile, Hoa Hao dissident Le Quang Liem (protect) told us on April 4 that his sect was able to hold a ceremony in the Mekong Delta province of Dong Thap on April 3. The ceremony was to commemorate the disappearance of the founder of Hoa Haoism, whom Liem and his followers believe was murdered by the Communists in 1947. Liem told us that authorities in HCMC allowed him to travel to officiate and that an estimated 1,000 believers participated. Earlier, Liem had warned that Vietnamese authorities would try to prevent the breakaway Hoa Hao group from holding the event to which Liem promised his followers would respond with protests and possible self-immolations (Ref D).

UBCV CONTINUES TO PRESS ITS POLITICAL AGENDA  
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16. (SBU) We also are following closely new frictions between the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and local authorities. A March 30 report from the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) in Paris reported on the arrest of UBCV monk Thich Vien Phuong (strictly protect). Shortly after the reports we spoke with Phuong, who reported that around 4 p.m. on March 30, traffic police stopped him on his way back from a visit with UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do. The police searched his bag and

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confiscated audio and video equipment and recordings. He said that he denied to police knowing anything about the tapes during his seven hours of questioning on that day. However, Phuong told us that the recordings contained a tape of Thich Quang Do speaking in English highly critical of the GVN, the Communist Party, demanding democracy in Vietnam and calling for international intervention on behalf of the UBCV. (Note: On April 5, on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Commission Meeting in Geneva, the IBIB reportedly released a transcript of Thich Quang Do's message, which called Vietnam's 20-year market-oriented economic reform program a disaster and called for international support for UBCV efforts to secure democracy in Vietnam. End Note.)

17. (SBU) In a subsequent conversation on April 5, Phuong told us that he returned to the local police station on March 31, where he was questioned for one day -- morning and afternoon sessions -- about his association with Thich Quang Do. The police played back portions of the recording and presented the UBCV monk with a translation into Vietnamese. Phuong told us that he believed the police were attempting to get him to admit that he was part of an organized scheme to smuggle anti-GVN material out of the country. Phuong again denied knowing the contents of the recordings and told police he was only a courier. Since then, Phuong has not complied with follow-on summonses from ward- and district-level police. However, he sent a letter to the HCMC prosecutor's office complaining that the police illegally seized the materials and equipment and did not properly identify themselves at the time of detention. He alleged that the police also did not make clear what the basis was of his detention and subsequent summonses. Currently Phuong remains at the Giac Hoa pagoda in Binh Thanh district, under the supervision of Thich Vien Dinh, a senior UBCV monk.

18. (SBU) Comment: With the exception of the UBCV, our religious group contacts describe progress and rapprochement with Vietnamese authorities. Formal consultations with religious organizations on the legal framework on religion, the absence of any significant harassment of house churches over the past few months and the ability of a previously-suppressed Hoa Hao group to assemble and worship all are positive steps forward. The opening of the training course in Gai Lai offers the potential to greatly expand the official operations of the SECV there in the near future.

19. (SBU) Unlike other religious organizations in Southern Vietnam, the UBCV does not shy from away from mixing politics with religion. Its leaders mince no words that their principal position is a fundamental opposition to one-party, Communist rule in Vietnam. Thich Quang Do and others in the UBCV have told us clearly that they will use the pulpit to press for democratization and political change in Vietnam. From the Vietnamese perspective, this puts the UBCV in a different category from other religious organizations. Under these circumstances, the fear and hostility of the Vietnamese authorities towards the UBCV is predictable. We will continue to work closely with recognized and unrecognized religious organizations and provincial authorities to press for continued progress in expanding religious freedoms in Southern Vietnam. Similarly, we will continue to press Vietnamese

authorities to allow all activists, including members of the UBCV,  
to advocate peacefully for political change in Vietnam. End  
Comment.

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